# The One-Room School in the 21st Century

Text and photographs by NEENAH ELLIS



Children receive sustained, personal attention at America's remaining one-room schools, which also bind communities.

*Janis Nicholes (pitching) and Tyler Hereim (batting) take a baseball break outside their one-room school in Lennep, Montana.*

Millions of Americans still remember walking the proverbial mile to their one-room, country school. A hundred years ago, when America was an agricultural nation, there were nearly 200,000 of them: public schools where a single teacher taught all the lessons in all the grades. Today few still exist, less than 400. And they are disappearing rapidly.

Montana has nearly 100 public one-room schools, more than any other state. Every morning, on the wide-open range land of Meagher County, four students raise the American flag in front of their white, clapboard school called Lennep Elementary.

To start the day, teacher Barb Nolan reads aloud from the local weekly newspaper, which includes news about who's gone to visit relatives in the city. And then the students—two in fourth grade and one in fifth—work independently while five-year-old Tyler, who's in kindergarten, reads aloud. Nolan is thrilled that Tyler's learned to read so young. All her students are working above grade level in most of their subjects.

"I'll teach them a lesson and they just get it right off the bat, so I don't give them extra practice," she says, "I just move on, whereas, I think if there were 30 kids, obviously there would be some that wouldn't get it that first time—or in the first 10 problems—and so we'd move at a slower place. So the small school for them has really boosted their academic achievement level."

Rural students in Montana typically perform better than urban kids. But one-room schools are disappearing in the state—as they are all over the West and Midwest—as more people move to cities to find work.

In the grasslands of Sioux County, Nebraska, three boys make up the entire student body of the Glen School. On a warm

spring afternoon, they hike through a nearby canyon with their teacher, Moni Hourt. They are heading for a fort they built out of sticks and logs, which was inspired by a novel they read during the school year. Because she has so few students, the teacher has the flexibility to let the boys follow their interests and still meet the educational standards set by the state. The result, she says, is confident kids who know themselves and the place they come from.

At another one-room school 24 kilometers away, teacher Tara Dunn has seven students. This morning she huddles at a desk with Kyle, who's in second grade.

"If you take away three from 24, what do you get?" she asks.

"Twenty-four," says Kyle,

"If you take away *three* from 24. You *had* 24."

"Ten!" Kyle announces.

"Now, wait just a second," she says gently.

Kyle lets out a frustrated grunt.

"I can always tell when I'm teaching you something new, can't I, Kyle?" says Dunn. "How can I tell?"

"I'm mad."

"Yeah, you get grouchy with me, don't you?" She smiles. She's gentle. Kyle calms down and gets back to work.

Dunn is the only teacher Kyle's ever had and she knows his quirks. And she might have six more years to work with him but for the fact that Nebraska is closing many of its one-room schools after a classic debate in the state legislature about whether to close small schools to achieve so-called "economies of scale" or keep them open, despite their higher cost per student.

The New England region in the northeastern United States has even fewer one-room schools left. The state of New Hampshire has three, including the red brick Croydon Village School, open since 1780. First, second and third graders learn the basics from teacher Lynn Touchette, who loves her job, she says, partly because the town and school are so closely intertwined.

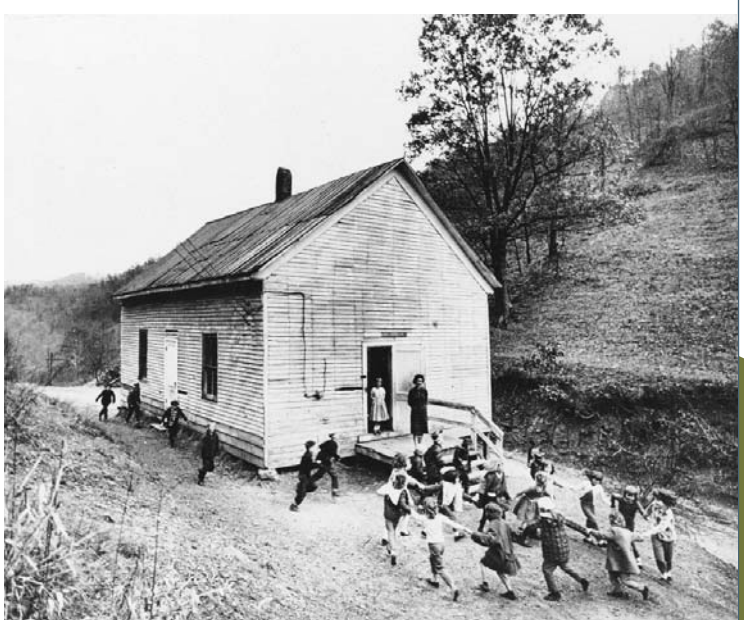
"When we have a parent night, there isn't a child who doesn't bring parents," she says, "and sometimes there are two sets of parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins and it's a big celebration. That says a lot to the kids, because when what they're doing is *that* important, that e*veryone* in their family comes out to see it, that tells them more then me telling them 100 times how important their education is."

Four generations of Carol Marsh's family studied at the Croydon school and she's a member of the school board. The students "have a tight bond between each other, a tight bond with the teacher, and they just take that forward in life with them," she says. "We see it in everything they do—that foundation is just a monumental piece of their success."

Croydon residents vote every year at their town meeting to keep the school open, but its future is uncertain. It's not because the area is losing population, as in the western and midwestern states, but because Croydon is growing and changing from a rural farming village to a bedroom community and no one knows if newcomers will honor tradition and keep the school open.

A continent away, on the island of Maui, the last one-room school in Hawaii closed in 2005 after 96 years. The village of Keanae, on the island's north coast, had only three school-age children left. Florence Harold, the last teacher, took me to see the musty classroom, her flip-flops echoing in the dark.

"I want to show you all these books," she says. "When I first came here the books were all over the place and I said, 'We





*Left: Luke Prosser completes his work as his dog, Butch, waits patiently at the Glen School in Glen, Nebraska.*

*Above: Children from the first to sixth grade play outside their one-room school in Kentucky in this 1964 photograph. The school had electric lights, but no water.*

must get rid of all these old books.' But the parents said, 'You can't do that!' Now, look at the *age* of these books. 'Why?' I said, 'We should get new ones.' 'But, our grandfathers and grandmothers read these books,' the parents said. 'You cannot get rid of them.' "

Keanae is one of Hawaii's last native villages and the parents and community members, concerned about their culture, fought hard to keep the school open. But the principal said he needed the teaching position at another school in the district, a school that has repeatedly failed to make the adequate yearly progress required by federal standards.

So now the students from Keanae village travel by school bus an hour each way on a narrow mountain road to the larger school.

*Below: P.J. Williamson taught reading, writing, math and other subjects to 14 students at the Kentucky Fork School in Wyoming in 1964. The school was for grades one to eight.*

*Bottom: The Glen School in Sioux County, Nebraska.*

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Their parents, and grandparents, like Janet Redo, want their village school back. "My dad always said, 'A community without a school is not a community.' So he told me, 'Whatever you do, fight for the school. Don't have it close down,' " says Redo.

The public one-room school is an endangered institution all over the United States, but its methods and values are timeless. Educators and parents can't say enough good things about the small class sizes, the peer-to-peer teaching and the head start a student gets by having the same teacher for more than a year. And what these small, geographically isolated schools may lack in cultural diversity, some argue, they make up for with a strong sense of community.

On Monhegan Island, in the Gulf of Maine, thousands of summer tourists come to see a place that looks much as it did in the 1800s. In winter, though, the population dwindles to 50.

From their classroom on the hill, Monhegan's six students can see and hear the lobster boats come and go, even in the winter.

The state of Maine isn't sure it wants to keep island schools like this one open. Islanders are certain they do. Few people have the time or energy to home-school their kids and they don't want their young children in boarding schools on the mainland. And so, without a school, there might not be a winter community here at all. Monhegan School is the very heart of the village.

On a blustery night, deep in December, everyone on the island comes to the school to watch the students perform "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Then they share a traditional roast-beef dinner, sing Christmas carols and welcome Santa Claus into their midst, just as generations of Monhegan Islanders have before them. Lights burn bright at the one-room school and laughter pours out onto the snow.

***Neenah Ellis** is a writer, photographer and documentary producer in Maryland. Her one-room school Web site is www.theoneroomschool.org*